

Leffingwell Inn
348 Washington Street
Norwich~~TOWN~~
New London County
Connecticut

HABS No. CONN-245

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Eastern Office, Division of Design and Construction
143 South Third Street
Philadelphia 6, Pennsylvania

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. CONN-245

LEFFINGWELL INN

Street Address: 348 Washington Street, Norwich, ^{TOWN} New London County, Connecticut

Present Owner and Occupant: The Society of the Founders of Norwich, Connecticut, Incorporated, Norwich, Connecticut

Present Use: Museum

Brief Statement of Significance: The Leffingwell Inn, a large, carefully restored frame building, was the home of Colonel Christopher Leffingwell. The Inn, started about 1675 and, with successive additions, completed in its present form about a century later, preserves many characteristic and interesting features.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: The land on which the Leffingwell Inn originally stood was part of the tract William Backus, a founder of Norwich, received when the Town was settled in 1659. The property was inherited by his son, Stephen Backus, who started the present structure about 1675. This was the first of three principal stages of construction and is today incorporated into the south-east corner of the building.

The documented history of the building begins with the sale of the property by Stephen Backus to Ensign Thomas Leffingwell in April 1700. In July 1701 Thomas Leffingwell was granted permission to keep an inn in the building on his property. Thomas Leffingwell died in 1724, and the inventory of his estate indicates a second stage of construction had been completed. This second stage included the west end of the present structure comprising mainly the south parlor. The house was inherited by Thomas Leffingwell's son, Benajah Leffingwell, who continued to operate the inn and a store in the building.

Ownership next passed to Colonel Christopher Leffingwell, Revolutionary War figure and prominent businessman. The third stage of construction was done in the 1760's by Christopher Leffingwell. This included additions to the north parts of the house and alterations to the older parts. After Christopher Leffingwell's death, the house was inherited by his third wife, who in turn willed the house to a granddaughter, Mrs. Benjamin Huntington. The house remained in the Huntington family until 1943.

In 1956 when the house was in the way of the relocation of State Highways 2 and 32, it was offered to the Society of the Founders of Norwich, Incorporated, by the Connecticut State Highway Department for \$1.00 if they would move and preserve it. The offer was accepted and the building moved onto adjacent land provided by the Highway Department. Over \$100,000 was spent on the restoration of the house, which was largely completed by May 1960. The building committee for the restoration consisted of Richard Sharpe, Architect, Chairman; Abbott L. Cummings; and Elmer D. Keith. The work was effected by John J. Stone, master carpenter.

2. Sources of information:

- a. "Norwichtown--May 28, 1960," report on a joint meeting of the Antiquarian and Landmarks Society of Connecticut, Incorporated, and the Society of the Founders of Norwich, Connecticut, Incorporated, The Connecticut Antiquarian, July 1960.
- b. A Report on Leffingwell Inn, Norwichtown, Connecticut (Norwich, Connecticut: The Society of the Founders of Norwich, Connecticut, Incorporated, 1957).
- c. John J. Stone, The Restoration of The Leffingwell Inn, a report by the master carpenter who effected the restoration (Norwich, Connecticut: The Society of the Founders of Norwich, Connecticut, Incorporated, 1960).
- d. Philip A. Johnson, "The Leffingwell Inn," Antiques, June 1961, pages 566-569.

B. Supplemental Material:

1. The following is extracted from A Report on Leffingwell Inn, Norwichtown, Connecticut:

"On the corner of Washington and Town Streets in Norwich, Connecticut, an old landmark Leffingwell Inn was in danger of demolition. . . .

"The state of Connecticut, which acquired the property to make room for a highway improvement in that area, turned the Inn property over to the Norwich Founder's Society for a nominal sum but with the stipulation that the historic landmark would be preserved by the society as an historical shrine. . . .

"The Inn was built on the home lot of one of the founding fathers of Norwich, William Backus, Sr. At that time, in Norwich, a home lot consisted of six acres. Backus died shortly after arriving in Norwich and willed the land to his son Stephen who apparently built on it circa 1675. The recorded history of the house begins when Stephen Backus, Jr., in April, 1700, sold the home lot to Ensign Thomas Leffingwell, who in July of 1701 was granted liberty 'to keep a publique house of entertainment for strangers.'

" . . . It is of prime interest to note that the location¹⁶ of the settlement of Norwich was the natural consequence of the heroic action of Thomas Leffingwell. The fort held by Uncas, chief of the Mohegans, near the Thames River was besieged by the Narragansetts, and Uncas and his followers were without provisions. Uncas was able to send a messenger to the English informing them of the difficult position they would be in if the Mohegans were destroyed. Thomas Leffingwell, who at the time was an ensign assigned at Saybrook, Conn., obtained a canoe and was able to bring provisions into the fort. The Narragansetts, realizing aid had been received raised the seige and retreated in disgust. In gratitude for the help that Thomas Leffingwell had given the Mohegans, Uncas gave him a tract of land where the battle had taken place. Five years later, in 1659, a permanent deed was drawn up, when a group of men led by Captain John Mason from Saybrook, met with Uncas and his two sons and listed the 35 proprietors and turned over to them this tract which became the township of Norwich.

"Thomas Leffingwell married Mary Bushnell, who was a nurse. After her husband's death she was allotted 'the use of the south part of the house, with back lean-to and bedrooms in said lean-to.' She used these rooms to heal and nurse the sick in the community. Benajah Leffingwell, son of Mary and Thomas Leffingwell, was left the house and continued to run it as an inn and a store. He apparently enlarged the Inn's facilities as his inventory shows the tavern well provided to take care of many more guests than in his father's day.

"After Benajah Leffingwell's death the Inn descended to Col. Christopher Leffingwell. . . He was a very enterprising and perspicacious business man; a pioneer in many fields. In 1766 he established the first paper mill in Connecticut. This venture was to meet a pressing economic need of Leffingwell's and was not a financial success at the start. Leffingwell sought government aid on the grounds that it was a public necessity of much importance to the welfare of the colony. In May, 1769, the General Assembly of the Colony granted Leffingwell an annual bounty of 'two pence the quire on all good writing paper and 1 penny the quire on all printing and coarser paper.' In 1772 the bounty was discontinued. In 1766 Col. Leffingwell started a stocking factory, the first of its kind. By 1791 he had nine looms in operation, producing annually nearly 1500 pairs of hose. Still another project started in 1766 was a pottery located at Bean Hill. An example of the product can be seen at the Morgan Memorial in Hartford. It is a dated jug of brown glaze. A chocolate mill and a fulling mill followed, also a clothiers shop and dye house located at the falls in Norwich. In 1784 he gave land to Norwich toward the opening of a new street down to the 'Landing,' the present Broadway, and planted a row of elms on either side that added great beauty and dignity to the street for over a century.

"Colonel Leffingwell was extraordinarily active in all matters connected with the war. His company of light infantry was unequalled in order and equipment. He was the confidential advisor of Governor Trumbull and Silas Deane. Because he was such an ardent patriot he was appointed in 1775 one of the Committee of Correspondence. Whenever New London was threatened by the enemy's fleet, a message was sent to Norwich and more than once the then Captain Leffingwell and his light infantry went down to the defense of their friends at the river's mouth. He understood the importance of quietly securing at once Fort Ticonderoga and Lake Champlain and was one of those who united in sending a committee to Vermont, supplied with funds, to engage the services of Colonel Ethan Allen and the Green Mountain Boys.

"... General George Washington sought his assistance and counsel time and again. In this connection Washington accepted the hospitality of his beautiful home. . . . General Washington's visits to Norwich and Lebanon were largely in the interest of securing supplies and provisions for the Continental Army. In this respect he relied heavily on both Governor Jonathan Trumbull of Lebanon and on Christopher Leffingwell. Their recruitment of men and material contributed mightily to the final successful conclusion of the Revolutionary War. One of Washington's visits to this area was in response to the persistent persuasion of Colonel Leffingwell who was greatly concerned by the weakness of our long line of defense, north and south, and plans were made during this visit to the Inn to strengthen that defense. In 1784 Washington appointed Leffingwell the first naval officer under the new government. Christopher Leffingwell had a son named David who was a personal friend of Washington Irving and traveled with Irving in Europe and is mentioned in Irving's diary.

"... Dying at the age of 76, Colonel Leffingwell was survived by his third wife. At her death Mrs. Leffingwell left the home to her grand-daughter, Mrs. Benjamin Huntington. It remained in the Huntington family for another century before finally passing to other hands."

2. The following is extracted from John J. Stone, The Restoration of The Leffingwell Inn:

"The structure known as The Leffingwell Inn consists of three successive stages of construction over a period of roughly a century. In its final stage it has an ell-shaped appearance of two salt box houses joined together on their rear corners so that it has two fronts and two ends. . . .

"TAVERN ROOM

"Proceeding through the south door we enter into what used to be the entrance hall. To the right the room which is one step down is the inside of the original structure 18 by 22 feet in size and built by Stephen

Backus in 1675. It was of a one room plan located in the southeast corner of the building as it stands today. It had an end lean-to one story high on the north end and apparently partial lean-tos on the west side. . . . In the 1760's Christopher Leffingwell, the then owner, redecorated this room adding the panel work on all four sides. . . . These panelled walls were placed over a foot inside the structure of the Backus House to clear the raised sill.

"The room apparently had triple casement windows, one in the center of the south wall and one in each of the locations of the present two east windows. We have been able to find the location of all these windows from work in the walls. However, the retention of the panelling does not permit them being shown. Inside the walls we found fragments of diamond shaped panes of glass used in the casement windows, and pieces of lead calmes that held it together. The present type of double hung window was unknown much before 1710.

"While discussing windows it is appropriate to remark that an unusual feature of this house is the fact that we have intact almost all of the original sash put in about 1720 and replacing the older casement windows in the Backus House. These are 7 by 9 inch glass which is a bit larger than the 6 by 8 inch more commonly found. Muntins vary from 1 to 1-1/4 inch in width, typical of the early 18th century windows. Of all the rooms in the house only the parlour has later sash and somewhat later frames.

"The room apparently was the entire extent of the main frame of the house. To the north there was an end lean-to as stated above, and on the side where you enter there were probably partial lean-tos, possibly the chimney in a rather unconventional location. . . . The fireplace probably dates from the time when the room was rebuilt in the 1760's although the granite block was undoubtedly used from the earlier chimney. . . . Very shortly after the panelling was added, the chimney caught fire. . . . It was necessary to support the burned off end of one of the summers to throw a new timber across from the other summer to the north girt. This accounts for the peculiar panel work above the fireplace on the ceiling. . . .

"Returning to. . . the entrance hall, this part of the house including the room to the left, was the first addition to the house. . . . It is almost certain that this was a separate structure used in part to add to the old Backus House from which the roof was removed for the purpose and the new structure moved over on top of it. Thomas Leffingwell died in 1724 and the inventory of his estate refers to the rooms in this addition which, consequently, must have been put on before 1724. With this addition the house assumed the form of the typical house of the period, one room deep with a central stair porch and a great central chimney. . . .

"SOUTH PARLOUR

"The room to the left of the entrance is the parlour of

the house. This is the room mentioned in the agreement among the heirs after Thomas' death as being the great south room which was left to the life use of his widow, Mary. She survived him by about twenty years, during the ownership of her son, Benajah. Probably at the time of her death some redecoration was done on this room and likely at that time, circa 1750, the present panelling was put in. This red colored panelling is the earliest in the house. . . . Much restoration has been done in this room. . . . The windows. . . are the only part of the room which was not put back to the earliest period. The frames are early, probably date from 1810. Because of this we have kept them. The sash in three of the windows are later. . . .

"KITCHEN

"The rear (north) wall of this room i.e., south parlor is now the dividing wall to the third stage of the house. In the first instance this area the rear, third stage was occupied by a small lean-to bedroom. Most of this work was removed during Christopher's later change. The tiny door to the left in the rear wall of the south parlor is the second of two doors, and replaces an earlier one in a board wall which went into the tiny lean-to bedroom. The door to the right, which now goes into the kitchen, previously was a cupboard in this room. When the later kitchen was built, the cupboard was removed and this door opened up as a passageway to the kitchen. . . . The rear, third stage is one of the most complicated areas of the house. The wall to the right (east) is panelled with a fireplace opening but there is no fireplace. Opposite this there is a cooking fireplace. There were at different times at least four fireplaces in this room. . . . Apparently when this third stage was added, it was intended to have. . . a small parlour. The panelling was introduced and the small fireplace opening apparently was designed with that in mind. Before the old chimney was removed there was a cooking fireplace in the chimney's north face as part of the old kitchen. About this time the fire in the main chimney occurred and it became immediately necessary to provide a new cooking fireplace. The present hearth (west wall) apparently is where this new fireplace was built, complete with ovens and all cooking facilities. When the older fireplace in the central chimney was removed, it left a small room which had no purpose of any utility. So the wall was taken down and moved about seven feet to where the old fireplace had stood, bringing this room up to kitchen proportions. The room now had two fireplaces, the cooking fireplace for the kitchen in the west wall which was in daily use, and the small heating fireplace on the opposite wall which was of no use whatever. Therefore the board doors were put in to close up the old fireplace opening in the panel wall. About 1840 this chimney was removed. We have not attempted to restore this fireplace. We have however restored the old cooking fireplace on its original site. . . .

"To the west of this room is a rear stair hall which was

put in in the 1800's and a modern kitchen which was added somewhat later. . . .

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"NORTH PARLOUR

George Washington Breakfast Room

". . . When the third stage was added to the house, probably between 1730 and 1765, the present kitchen was intended for a small parlour or dining room. The George Washington room /at the northeast corner of the house/ had been designed as a bedroom. It became necessary to change the room arrangements and this room became a small parlour. We have restored in this area the panel wall, one section only of this wall is a portion of the original panelling. It was found elsewhere in the house. The shutters also on the windows are mostly original shutters. They had also been re-used elsewhere. Other than this, all the original shutters of the house have long since disappeared. The fireplace is a restoration; the tile hearth came from the old Cleveland House which was demolished in 1959, the brick fireplace came from the Bliss Houses just to the south of the Leffingwell Inn, demolished the same year. . . . Notice the unusual door leading from this room into the entrance hall. It has a diagonal stile. No earlier door was ever in this area, neither is there any other door of this type in this house. . . . The walls in this area and in the kitchen are filled with brick, a practice of that date not unknown but rather rare in this part of Connecticut. That was done for the purpose of insulation. On April 8, 1776, George Washington evidently had breakfast with Colonel Christopher Leffingwell. Family tradition says that this was the room in which this meal took place. An interesting sidelight to this is that the large over mantle panel came from the Lafayette Tavern in Plainfield where Washington had stopped only the day before.

"We come to the present stair hall, the later entrance to the building (east door). . . added by Christopher in the 1760's, replacing some of the earlier lean-to. . . . Also there was now an opportunity to install the new type of staircase which was coming into use in the two-chimney houses of the period. After this was done it was possible to remove the old staircase in the south hall.

"CELLAR KITCHEN

". . . At the bottom of the stairs we have the old basement kitchen, with its fireplace restored complete with ovens. . . . The area around the stairs has been put back as it was before the house was moved. A very small part of this is restoration. The chimney has been rebuilt as it was before the house was moved. Elsewhere in the house above the first floor level the chimneys were moved intact. . . .

"The balance of the basement has been used as galleries for display, a reading room for historical research, and contains a fireproof vault for precious records and documents. There was no attempt at restoration of anything that existed in this area. . . .

"1675 BEDROOM

". . . This is the upper chamber of the old Backus house which, as stated previously, consisted of only one room inside with lean-tos. In the case of the room below it, the very important panelling of the 1760's made it impossible to do any restoration to the 17th century period. In this second floor level we had little important later work in our way. We were able to remove most of the unimportant 18th century work to show the 17th century work which remains. The shutters on the windows, the chair rail, and the windows themselves which are painted green, are the only later work which was retained. Most of the other work dates from before 1700. Notice in particular the vertical boarded wall to the left and the right of the fireplace. . . .these boards do not occur around the fireplace. They do on either side of it. We believe that this small fireplace dates from the rebuilding in the 1760's. The older fireplace would have been much larger and would have occupied all the space between the shadow moulded boards. . . . Between the two south windows a space has been left open in the plaster. This is the only area where it is possible to show the entire extent of the original casement window opening. . . . These casement windows were fastened to the outside of the framing. The head jamb was fastened to the outside of the girt and the sill apparently rested on this timber which was let into the studs. . . .all the casement windows were three part triple mullion casement windows. Ordinarily at this stage we find most of the windows quite tiny with possibly one or two double or triple windows in the entire house. Possibly the fact that Backus was a glazier accounts for this magnificent display of windows. . . .

"In the ceiling. . .between the joists we have plaster over cedar laths. . . . It was customary merely to whitewash the underside of the boards which show between the joists. This was done on the first floor of this house. . . . The floor in this room of white pine which has undergone only minor repairs appears to be entirely original with the Backus house.

"CHILD'S BEDROOM

". . . The small south hall. . .was at one time the upper stair porch. At the time of the rebuilding of the chimney the present floor was laid by Christopher. . . . The stairway came up to your right. Above the header there was a small space left open. If you will look through here you will see the chimney resuming its way through the roof in one place. If you pass through the doorway ahead of you, you are actually walking through the old chimney. As you go through here, look up and notice the oak platform that was thrown across to hold the center of the united chimney when the portion below was removed. The most interesting thing to be seen in this stair porch area is the plate of the Backus house frame. . . . In this case, due to the fact that the addition was an older house reused and brought intact over the top of the

Backus house, it was unnecessary to remove the plate, only^{16.} the rafters have been removed. You may see, on four-foot centers, the old rafter seats. Notice the angle of these. This roof had a pitch of 16 inches to the foot, very extreme by our present day standards, very typical of Elizabethan work and of the earliest work in this country."

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: Begun about 1675 and completed to its present form about a century later, this large frame building preserves many interesting and characteristic features.
2. Condition of fabric: The building was moved and restored 1956-1960 and is in excellent condition.

B. Technical Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The inn is L-shaped, built in the form of two salt boxes joined at the corner having two fronts and two ends. The house originally stood at the intersection of two streets, facing both and with an entrance on each. Each front of the L-shaped building is two stories high and about 45 feet long divided into five bays. The two fronts face south and east.
2. Foundations: The rough-cut stone foundations date from 1956 when the house was moved.
3. Wall construction: Heavy timber frame structure, covered with clapboards with beaded lower edges and with beaded corner boards.
4. Stoops: Stone stoops, one step high, at both east and south entrances.
5. Chimneys: Three brick chimneys. The south leg of the L-shaped house has a large central chimney. This was broken through to make central halls on the first and second floor levels, probably in the 1760's. The two halves of the chimney are joined in the attic and projected through the roof as a single large chimney. There is a second chimney in the north half of the east leg of the house, and a third in the rear lean-to sections on the northwest side of the house.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: The south entrance has a four-panel door, 42 inches by 73 inches, with a four-light transom. The doorway has flat, fluted pilasters and

a molded entablature. The east entrance has a six-panel door, 35 inches by 73 inches, with a four-light transom. The door is hung on wrought-iron, tulip-head, strap and pintle hinges. The doorway has molded trim and a molded entablature.

- b. Windows and shutters: The house has double-hung windows with six-light sash over nine-light, nine-light over nine, or twelve-light over twelve. The windows are set in simple frames with molded sills and molded heads on the first floor. There are no shutters. In the museum, housed in the modern part of the basement, are fragments of one of the original diamond-shaped, leaded casements from the 1675 house.

7. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: The two legs of the house have gable roofs, which meet in a hip at the southeast corner. The roof is framed without a ridge pole, and with rafters spaced an average of 36 inches on center. Covered with shingles.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Boxed eaves with a cyma recta crown mold and a bed mold.

C. Technical Description of Interiors:

- 1. Floor plan: The south leg of the L-shaped house has a central hall with one room on each side on both floors. The south entrance leads into this hall. On the first floor the room west of the central hall, called the south parlor, is from the second stage of construction by Thomas Leffingwell. The part of the house east of the central hall, the southeast corner of the building, on both floors, is the original 1675 Backus house. The first floor room in this section is called the tavern room; the second floor room is called the 1675 bedroom. North of the tavern room, in the east leg of the house, is a stair and entrance hall. The east entrance leads into this hall. North of this hall, at the north end of the east leg of the house, is the north parlor, sometimes called the George Washington Breakfast Room. The kitchen is at the northwest corner of the house in the combined lean-tos behind the two legs of the house. The kitchen, in its final form, and the north parlor belong to the third stage of construction. There is a restored kitchen in the northeast corner of the cellar; the rest of the cellar is new.
- 2. Stairways: The present stairway in the east hall dates from the 1760's, when the earlier U-shaped stair opposite the south entrance was probably removed. The present one is an open-string stair with square newels, turned balusters, and molded handrail.

3. Flooring: Wide pine boards.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: The walls are plastered, plastered and papered, or paneled. Ceilings are plastered, some with exposed beams. All four walls of the tavern room were paneled in the 1760's covering the exposed frame and walls of the original Backus house, which still show an original Vermillion paint. Panels vary in size up to 32 inches wide. The extensive paneling work in this room includes several cupboards, window seats, and interior shutters. The ceiling is plastered. The height from the floor to the bottom of the cased summer beams is 6'-9"; to the plaster ceiling 7'-3". The fireplace and a large panel above are surrounded by bolection moldings. The stone fireplace is painted black.

The south parlor has plaster walls papered with a reproduction of an eighteenth century French paper. The fireplace wall is paneled. There is a bolection molding around the fireplace and three fluted, flat pilasters in the paneling over the fireplace. The ceiling is plastered and the exposed summer cased.

In the kitchen, the west wall with the large cooking fireplace is covered with vertical boards with beaded joints. The opposite, or east, wall with the small closed fireplace is paneled. The ceiling and the north wall are plastered.

The north parlor has a paneled fireplace wall, three plastered walls with a simple molded chair rail, and a plastered ceiling. The frame of the house is exposed with beaded edges. Windows have interior paneled shutters.

The ceiling of the 1675 bedroom is plastered between the exposed joists. The outside walls are plastered and the fireplace wall covered with vertical boards with shadow molded edges. There is a chair rail on the outside walls. Windows have sliding, paneled, interior shutters.

The restored kitchen in the basement has a large cooking fireplace and oven made of brick and stone.

5. Doorways and doors: Batten doors in the 1675 bedroom; panel doors elsewhere. Doors in the tavern room have three panels--two tall narrow ones in the upper half of the door, and a large, nearly square panel below. The door to the north parlor has a diagonal rail in the lower half, making two triangular panels. Doorways are very simple, either unrelieved by ornament or with a simple molded trim.
6. Hardware: Brass, wrought-iron, and wood hardware.
7. Lighting: The house is partly lighted by electricity.
8. Heating: Central, gas-fired, hot-air heat.

D. Site:

1. General setting: The house is situated on a large, open low lot at a busy intersection. The lot is graded to

make a cellar entrance to the cellar kitchen on the north side of the house. 16.

2. Landscaping: Informal landscaping with lawn and shrubs.

Prepared by Osmund R. Overby, Architect
National Park Service
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